



A sign in the the 1400 block of San Marcos Road opposes a newly formed water district in the Paso Robles Basin. **David Middlecamp** - dmiddlecamp@thetribunenews.com

LOCAL

SLO County refuses to relinquish control to new North County water district



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The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday refused to relinquish control as the groundwater sustainability agency to landowners who formed their own district in the Paso Robles Basin, a controversial issue that has pitted neighbor against neighbor.

Members of the newly formed Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District, who are some of the largest water users in that area, say they want a say in how groundwater is managed in their area and they have a right to their choice of representation. They asked the county to relinquish control as the groundwater sustainability agency over their private property within the newly-formed district.

Opponents of the water district, including 390 people who signed a petition in opposition to the transfer of representation, questioned the water district's intentions and speculated it's part of a "water grab."

As a result of the 3-2 vote Tuesday, the county will maintain control as the GSA within the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District service area to create a state-mandated groundwater sustainability plan for the entire basin. That will be done in a collaborative group along with the city of Paso Robles, the Shandon-San Juan Water District, the San Miguel CSD and the Heritage Ranch Community Services District, all of which are their own GSA.

The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act requires all water basins in overdraft, including the Salinas Valley-Paso Robles Area Subbasin (where the water district is located), to create groundwater sustainability plans.

The county decided last year to act as the GSA over the areas that weren't already represented by an organization in to meet a state deadline, but documented that the board would consider relinquishing control to the water district if it was formed, prompting some on Tuesday to claim that the county was renegeing on their promise.

Supervisors Debbie Arnold, Lynn Compton and John Peschong voted that the county should continue to be the GSA in the area, against the recommendation of the San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau, the Paso Wine Alliance and county staff.

"Farm Bureau strongly believes in local control, (and landowner control is as local as can be), and in the ability of the EPC to be able to sustainably manage, protect, and even enhance the groundwater resource and at the same time, satisfy the requirements of SGMA, while preserving the ability of existing agricultural lands to remain productive," the group said in a letter to supervisors.

In explaining her vote, District 5 Supervisor Arnold said she believes the county flood control district is the proper choice for rural landowners for writing a GSP and that "the county is not a business; it serves all the businesses large and small when considering all the landowners."

Both Compton and Peschong criticized how much power private water districts would have in forming the GSP if the county relinquished control to the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District, noting that the county's vote in a collaborative structure would decrease from 61 percent to 32 percent.

"I think that's the scariest part of this," Peschong said.

GSA	Recommended Voting / Cost Share	
	Current GSAs/ Without EPCWD	With EPCWD/ Upon County Action
County of SLO	61%	32%
City of Paso Robles	15%	15%
Shandon-San Juan Water District	20%	20%
San Miguel CSD	3%	3%
Heritage Ranch CSD	1%	1%
<i>If formed: Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District</i>	--	29%
TOTAL	100%	100%

A memorandum of understanding entered into by the county last year includes voting terms for collaborative management over the Paso Basin. San Luis Obispo County Public Works Department

The Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District and the Shandon-San Juan Water District combined would have 49 percent of the vote in the collaborative structure, which Peschong said was "inherently unfair" because a majority of the parcels in the basin are outside of the water district.

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"Those water districts voting together could outvote us," Compton said.

Supervisors Bruce Gibson and Adam Hill voted to relinquish control, suggesting that the majority votes were made out of fear and ideology.